Cheeky Little Monkeys: *Emancipation and Art in regards to education versus participation*

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Biography
Anthony Schrag is a practising artist and researcher who has worked nationally and internationally. His practice occurs in a participatory manner, and central to his work is a broader discussion about the place of art in a social context. He is currently programme leader of the MA in Arts, Festivals and Cultural Management at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh.

Research interests include cultural policy, institutionally supported art projects, and examining how 'art' is supported. He has been the recipient of numerous awards, commissions and exhibitions and his practice-based PhD explored the relationship between artists, institutions and the public, looking specifically at the productive nature of conflict.

The artist Nathalie De Brie once referred to his practice as 'Fearless'. The writer Marjorie Celona once said: 'Anthony, you have a lot of ideas. Not all of them are good.'

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Introduction:

The inception of the Social Exclusion Unit in 1997 by the recently elected New Labour government saw participatory art projects being applied to the issues of community cohesion 1 and social inclusion 2 with the explicit aim of the artistic works to seek consensus and eradicate social division. However, society is inherently dissensual, it is wrought with friction which can never be dissolved 3 and as Rosalyn Deutsche clarifies: 'Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are conditions of its existence' 4. This dichotomy between *intention* and *reality* reveals the issues of power at play, and the complicated problems related to the instrumentalisation of artistic works within the social realm.

In the UK, the history of public projects emerged out of 'community arts', which used art as an ameliorative, political balm to promote notions of communitarianism 5 and cohesive societies 6. This history has informed a contemporary 'community aesthetic' based in activist or educational pedagogies premised on utopian notions of a perfect, leftist society. This future society, however, seems to make no room for ideologies from the right or contrary political voices. It begs the question whether or not these activist artists are designing 'participation' projects that are based in dialogue, or are using 'education' as a form of social engineering to create a world of single (leftist) ideological perspective.

This article explores the difference between the 'educational' and 'participatory' intentions of participatory art projects, and the relationship these have to practice, policy and the politics of activism. It has been written from the perspective of a practitioner, and concludes with an example of my own work. It begins, however, with a work by the artist collective *Collaborative Encounters*, developed for the National Museum in Cardiff in 2013 in order to frame the concepts discussed.

The documentation of the *Museum of Lies* project explains that the artists designed a museum-based programme for children that was conceived, driven and formulated entirely by lies - lies from the artists; lies from the participants; lies from the institution. The aim of the project was to explore the premise and purpose of an 'educational' project, as the artists write, by asking students to

tell lies about museum artefacts… the project aims to short-circuit the traditional power relationships of traditional museum learning, and offer a project that empowers the students to begin their own process of historical learning and discovery and creative action. 7

The subversion of this project was to explore the historical premise of the museum - an edifying institution which aims to give ‘citizens cultural fulfillment though the displaying of objects in order to educate them’ 8. In doing so, it problematised who had the authority to present ‘truth’ and the contingent nature of a museum’s power. It did not take an activist strategy that may have - for example - challenged and critiqued the museum by educating the children on the wrongs of its colonial history. Rather, it configured the children, the museum and the artists as equal participants in a mutual discussion about the purpose of museums. Establishing equity between participants signifies a difference between an intention of ‘education’ and ‘participation’ which is important to unravel.

Education vs Participation.

Semiotically, the etymology of *pedagogy* stems from the Greek *paidagōgia*, that is a combination of *paidagōgos* ('I lead') and *paidos* ('child'), therefore literally meaning 'to lead the child.' It evokes images of a child being dragged to the front of the class by an angry school mistress, or of a headmaster pulling an unruly student by the ear down the corridor. It is a concept that is charged with power dynamics traditionally described as the ‘banking’ system 9, in which ‘empty vessels’ (children, the poor, the criminal, etc.) are to be filled with the correct sort of knowledge from the dominant hegemony. Jacques Ranciere argues that that this is not a Victorian, outdated model of education, but that this system still operates, falsely promising emancipation through learning. It is a false promise because education systems are not based in a relationship of equity, but still divided into those who ‘do not know' and those that ‘do know.’ This dichotomy assumes a pre-conditioned inequality: that there are certain kinds of knowledge to be valued and that those without that knowledge are lacking. As a way to illustrate this imbalance he uses the metaphor of translation in his philosophical novel *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* 10*,* which tells the tale of Jacotot, a teacher who takes a job teaching French Literature in a Dutch university, despite him having no Dutch and the students having no French. He ‘teaches’ the students via a bilingual text - a shared touchstone - and through this link they work together. Although Jacotot does not ‘teach’ the students anything, they have learned to read French literature and this 'challenges the assumption that in order to teach, a teacher needs to be in possession of knowledge that s/he can then explain to the students’ 11. From this, Ranciere argues there is

no necessary link between teaching and having knowledge. In other words, the inequality which education is designed to address should be remedied not by seeking to transfer knowledge (be it either through progressive or authoritarian means) but by establishing a relationship of equality between master and student, between the one who demands that intelligence manifest itself and the other who develops his or her own intellect. 12

This succinct presentation of Ranciere’s concepts determines that if an educational process is predicated upon inequality, it would therefore be impossible for it to be employed in an emancipatory manner. Consider education programmes within art museum/gallery settings and how often they are designed to ‘lead the child’ towards an understanding that is possessed by the museum/gallery/artist - be that skills, concepts or insights about art, culture or even politics. Importantly, these programmes do not necessarily pertain to actual children, but could refer to the equally to those who ‘do not participate in the right way*’* 13: the working class, juvenile delinquents, deprived communities, the elderly, etc.

Socially Engaged Art as Education

This concept has been pursued by Sophie Hope, 14 who has framed the processes of state sponsored Socially Engaged Art in a similar educational manner - along with other theorists. Levitas 15, Hewitt 16, Beel 17 and McLean 18 for example - all of whom have recognised the neoliberal tendencies of cultural policies that seek to 'construct civic identities' amenable to the state 19. These thinkers have presented arguments that explicitly show how cultural projects have been variously framed in a similar pedagogical model to the ‘banking’ system, where the

participants have been framed as empty vessels and led towards particular neoliberal ideas of the dominant hegemony.

One would think, therefore, that artistic works which are based in activism(s) would be useful in challenging this approach, leading to a more democratic or egalitarian sphere. However, consider the projects of the *Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army* (CIRCA) or Tania Bruguera who both enact workshops - educational classes - on how to resist 'right-wing' activities. For example, developing workshops with environmental protestors to challenge fracking 20 or developing performances that educated audiences on techniques that police used to control activists 21.

In these works, activist artists aim to 'educate*'* their audience on how to resist these right-wing activities. The subtexts of these works are that one specific political ideology (right-wing activities: neoliberalism, global capital, police authority, etc.) is 'bad', and these radical (leftist) political ideologies are 'good'. In other words, one sort of knowledge is valued over another sort. While I personally and politically adhere to the latter ideologies, I question whether this the purpose of art? In an incredibly binary world, presenting dichotomies does nothing but further entrench our already established belief systems 22. In this way using 'art' to educate people about which political ideology is 'good' and which is 'bad' seems to be a form of social engineering, and activist artists who aim to make the world in their political image are attempting eradicate any dissensus and deny alternative (political) positions. This seems counter to the democratic sphere many activist artists aim to value so deeply.

I call this the 'Grandmother Problem'. My Grandma was a woman of her time: profoundly royalist, unintentionally racist, ultra-conservative and a committed Tory. We therefore sat on the opposite side of the social and political spectrum, with my liberal outlook, feminist framework, homosexual tendencies, and leftist views. Despite our differences, however, I was always aware that she *loved* me fiercely. Even though we had endless arguments, I always knew at the end of our debates, she'd make me tea and call me 'cheeky little monkey' while smiling.

She was not a 'bad' person: her political beliefs were not misguided or ill-founded - they were complex, deep and based on a foundation that she wanted a better world for her progeny. She would have put herself - all 4' 8' of her - in harms way to ensure that I was safe. She - and people similar to her - *believed* in her world view, and their ontological framework is not 'wrong'; it is just built on different epistemological foundations than mine, and it would be wrong of *me* to banish their perspectives. I also recognised that I could not 'educate' her about what she saw as wildly problematic beliefs: it was not my place to make her *just like me,* in the same that it was not her place to make me *like her.* I return to Deutsche: *'Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are conditions of its existence'* 23*.* The *problem* lies in understanding how to support participatory artistic works which can advocate a pluralistic, conflict-rich sphere, rather than employing simple binaries that activists often do.

Above, I have described education as a form of hegemonic power, where people are assimilated into the correct form of citizen via schools, correctional facilities and other education processes 24. Participation, however, is a more collaborative and egalitarian process, that has no premeditated outcomes: it is a process that 'commits to the engagement of, and co-authorship with, others and they are developed with groups and/or individuals 25. Within an artistic context is a process that 'can include any artform which involves people and communities in debate, collaboration or social interaction. The participatory element of socially engaged practice is key, with the artworks created often holding equal or less importance to the collaborative act of creating them' 26. As such, this work is dialogic and requires negotiation and conceptual synthesis between two or more agents. It does not eradicate one view, but rather complicates and entwines relationships further. While these terms 'education' and 'participation' are often collapsed, and complexly interwoven - no doubt participation involves some education and vice versa - the clarification of whether an artistic project is intended to be *educational* or *participatory* will reveal whether or not a project is a form of social engineering to 'construct civic identities' 27, or if it is a true collaborative approach that is based on a dialogic, relational model that sustains a dissensual demographic realm.

Cheeky, in theory.

As the vast majority of participatory art projects are now funded, designed and coordinated via institutions (as opposed to individual artist run projects) 28, and this relational dichotomy between the artist, the institution and the public is not only becoming the main format of participatory art projects but also a vitally important relationship to interrogate. Within this relational interchange, in order for art to be emancipatory, it is my contention that the artist must ensure a relationship of equity between all parties is present, but not to do so in an educational, activist process (which can, as seen above, either replicate inequality or eradicate the democratic sphere by disavowing dissensus). Rather, the artist can contribute to emancipatory processes by positioning themselves as a mediator between the institution and the public: a touchstone - a living, middle-ground embodiment of the bilingual text between the different sorts of knowledge.

How a participatory artist does this - as I have suggested elsewhere - can be by '*Being a Bit of An Asshole'* 29 or being a Social Wanker, not a Social Worker 30. It can also occur by applying the concept of Cheekiness. And, this is where the cheeky little monkey comes scampering into my thesis, chucking faeces about like it were confetti at a wedding. Dr Farrah Jarral suggests that cheekiness is hard to describe, and it is easier to define what it's not:

It's not quite the same as audacity - it takes itself less seriously than that. And it's not as rude as impudence because cheekiness never sets out to truly offend. Cheekiness, then, is neither high-minded nor aggressive. Its hallmark is good-hearted humour, a certain cheeriness of spirit. Often it is loud - think of the effectiveness of the whoopee cushion left on the unsuspecting teacher's chair. …Cheekiness isn't just funny, though. It has the power to deflate pomposity faster than any whoopee cushion.... Despite the chances of social humiliation, it is a low-risk way of breaking the rules and protesting. It says, in a gentle way, that you do not consent to something - some dynamic, some power structure, some constraint imposed on you by a bigger force. 31

Key here, is the 'gentle way of not consenting to constraints being imposed'. Indeed, this is the very nature of the *Museum of Lies*, who - via a good-hearted humour - protested against the dynamic of the educational process by designing a project which ensured a relationship of equity between the participants and the institution. In doing so, the work was able to present emancipatory insights into the structures that formulate, limit and constrain educational programmes for both the participants and the institution.

Cheeky, in practice.

How an artist is cheeky will be dependent on their context and their skillful negotiation of relationships and expectations of both the institutions and the communities. I would hesitate to suggest a formulaic structure of *how* one is cheeky 32. As Jarral suggests, cheekiness is multifaceted in its approach:

It is a way of creatively, often playfully, injecting resistance into the quotidian. It creates a space in which to push back against inequality, against commoditisation, colonisation, against the rules that say who you can talk to, what you are allowed to talk about, and how you talk, what your aspirations can be, what constitutes success or beauty, or how you are supposed to wear your masculinity or femininity. Scratch the surface, and you will find that beneath the silliest acts of cheekiness, there is often a deeply important matter that is being negotiated. 33

The way my grandmother and I negotiated the deeply important issues was perhaps the training ground for my cheekiness, and it is an approach that I have consistently tried to apply throughout my artistic work. One example of this occurred in 2013: I was invited by the *Timespan Museum and Gallery* to develop a response to the bicentenary of the Highland Clearances in a small Scottish village. The Highland Clearances are a nexus of complicated and contrasting political and social ideologies, which - far from being relegated to history - are played out in contemporary debates of economics, nationalism and identity. The museum was invested in the exploration of the Clearances, culturally capitalising on a locally unique circumstance. I was also aware it

attracted international visitors as part of the Scottish diaspora, and the museum was therefore also a financial life-blood. Some might suggest its main industry. The Clearances were therefore highly important, and I wondered what effect this had on the youth of the village, who seemed to be indoctrinated into their mythology at quite a young age via the exhibitions the *Heritage Committee of Timespan* presented at the museum, the talks in schools and other village events they arranged.

I was curious, then, to develop a critique of this educational framework and present a more egalitarian and participatory exploration of the subject. I therefore asked the Heritage Committee to divide into two groups, each one to present a case *for* or *against* the Highland Clearances. The two positions - '*The Clearances are Still Happening*' Vs. '*The Clearances are Over*' - would be presented in a mock trial. I informed them that I had found an incredibly important judge, and would they agree that whatever argument the judge decided would be considered a binding, social contract? They agreed to the proposals, confident in their historical narratives, and set to preparing their cases.

My cheeky act was to not inform them until the moment they entered the 'courtroom' (i.e., the gallery) that the judges would be made up of the twenty-three primary school children of the village, and it would be their children would decided the Case of The Clearances. The project therefore explored how the youth were being framed to tell particular narratives of history, and to explore their agency in deciding *which* narratives of history might or might not be relevant to them. The school children listened to the cases and decided at the end of the debates that 'The Clearances are Over'.

While it was a light-hearted act, the project put the museum's interests and the children's ability to develop their own intellect into a relationship of equity, rather than hierarchy. This relationship challenged the Heritage Committee, as it playfully undermined their position as sole keepers of a culture's stories; as decision-makers about what was or was not important. It asked *who* the museum served: the visiting diaspora, the financial imperatives of an organisation, or the local community? Or was this a more complicated relationship?

Importantly, the work did not set up to 'educate' the children, nor did it apply an activist modality that criticised the organisation. Using a Rancierian formulation of emancipation, it applied cheekiness as a methodology as a 'low-risk way of breaking the rules and protesting' that opened a space for difference and conflict

Conclusion

Being 'cheeky' offers a nuanced critique of power which stands in stark opposition to a political activism of other artists that aim to undermine traditional hegemonies by direct action or oppositional critique. This more activist-led challenge to hegemonic orders turns the arena of the social (and the 'artistic') into a competition between one idea of utopia and another: it does not challenge politics, but actually recapitulates politics. Nor does it refute a pedagogical approach, that can replicate hegemonies by perpetuating relationships of inequity. By this, I am suggesting that the light-touch of cheekiness can be a more an effective contribution to developing emancipatory insights and the potential for transformation than direct activist confrontation or supposed emancipatory education.

Notes

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32 I would hasten to add, additionally, that it is a trait not wholly limited to the realm of participatory arts and is visible in many other forms - David Shrigley’s humorous drawings; the tongue-in-cheek videos of Erica Eyres; the street art works of Banksy; even the monolithic ‘Fountain’ by Duchamp could easily be read as a cheeky intervention into the system in which the artist is working

33 Jarral, F. (2013) ‘Is Cheekiness a truly British Concept’ BBC Website (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24531486) . (Available online - accessed Dec 12, 2018).

Images

Fig 1.1: History on Trial (A Schrag, Photographic Documentation, 2013)
Fig 1.2: History on Trial (A Schrag, Photographic Documentation, 2013)
Fig 1.3: History on Trial (A Schrag, Photographic Documentation, 2013)